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ABSTRACT

A qualitative study examined what is taught in a whole language classroom, how it is taught, and what changes in curriculum and instruction occur and why. A third-grade teacher, who had taught for 5 years and was considered an exemplary teacher by her principal and colleagues, was interviewed. Nineteen children in the teacher's heterogenous reading group participated. Data included lesson plans, teacher designed pre- and posttests, field notes, graphic organizers, videotapes, and journal entries. Results indicated that the teacher: (1) focused on social studies content, but allocated little time for language arts, math, or science instruction; (2) used teaching activities that ranged from question-posing to recording what children found memorable; (3) sequenced activities arbitrarily; and (4) expected one resource or activity to meet multiple content area objectives. Results also indicated that changes in curriculum and instruction occurred because of the teacher's concern with student motivation, her perception of lesson effectiveness, and her emotional state. Findings raise concerns because the teacher is focusing on social studies to the neglect of other content areas, and she is assuming that one instructional resource or activity will meet several content area goals. (Contains 12 references.) (RS)

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Narrative Discourse as Qualitative Inquiry: A Whole Language Teacher's Decision Making Process

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From our perspective as visitors who had arrived a few minutes before school began, the physical arrangement of the classroom appeared to be very traditional: 25 well worn student desks and scaled down wooden chairs, one dusty chalkboard at the front of the room, and a small array of frayed books displayed on a shelf. We had been told by colleagues in the school of Teacher Education at the University of Georgia that when we observed in this classroom, we would see an exemplary teacher who created a very unique and exciting whole language classroom learning environment.

After the bell rang, the teacher and her 3rd grade students eagerly poured into the classroom and our expectations that this was a traditional classroom were immediately challenged. Events seemed to chaotically stream forward through swirling currents that consisted of bits of discussion interspersed with impromptu role playing and makeshift attempts by students to conduct experiments. By the end of the school day, we were intrigued by what we had witnessed and were overflowing with questions: How did the teacher make instructional decisions? What was the experience of teaching like in a context where no textbooks were utilized?

Even though research into teachers' decision making processes has been ongoing for over 30 years, there is little consensus as to how teachers go about making decisions in the midst of an instructional unit (Brehmer, Jungermann, Lorens, and Sevon, 1986). The purpose of this paper is to report on findings of

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a qualitative study that we conducted in this 3rd grade classroom over a period of several months. By conducting this study we hope to be able to add to a growing body of knowledge about teacher instructional decision making processes.

The Questions

In order to gain insight into the nature of the decision making involved in instruction and learning, our first question focused on the teacher's experiences in planning and conducting interdisciplinary, whole language lessons. The aim of the study was to go beyond the decisions that are made during initial lesson planning and thereby to be able to understand how a teacher's deeply held educational philosophies are played out in thought and practice throughout the implementation of a unit of study. Or as Janesick (in Clark & Peterson, 1986) explains, teachers' perceptions of the instructional roles they should play in the classroom often shape their lesson planning and implementation. Therefore, we wanted to find out how a whole language teacher makes decisions about curriculum and instruction in an interdisciplinary unit of study? More specifically, our questions consisted of: (1.) What is taught? (2.) How is it taught? (3.) What changes in curriculum and instruction occur and why?

The Participants

Teacher The teacher, who had taught elementary school for five years, was considered to be an exemplary teacher by her principal and colleagues. In a series of informal interviews, she stated that she had a whole language philosophy and wanted to create a classroom environment that consisted of a

seamless curriculum. In her view, a seamless curriculum-should incorporate interdisciplinary lessons/activities and combine instruction in reading, writing, social studies, science and math into cohesive units of study. Consequently, she felt learning should be child-centered because children (1) need to be motivated to learn, (2) learn best when they are actively engaged in making decisions about learning activities, and (3) are best able to construct knowledge when they are involved in hands-on activities.

The teacher did not use the district adopted textbooks because she felt the concepts and reading ability levels required were too difficult for most of the children in her class. She also believed that the materials were outdated, lacking in motivating activities, and poorly organized. As a result, she utilized children's literature and a variety of resources as materials for units of study. For example, during a unit on Puerto Rico, she included trade books (informational and fictional narrative), videos and guest visitors to provide informative resources for students. Additionally, she invited children to explore particular aspects of Puerto Rico through individual or small group projects that were shared with classmates during a culminating activity. It should be noted that the teacher selected the topic of Italy for the unit we observed because the PE teacher had assigned Italy to the class for a mini-olympic field day. The teacher wanted children to know about the history, geography, and culture of the country so they could benefit when they participated in the mini-olympics.

Children Nineteen children in 3rd grade (42% African American, 48% European American) participated in the study. This heterogeneous reading

ability group ranged in scores on the Iowa Test of Basic Skills (ITBS) from a grade level equivalency of 7.1 to 1.6, and National Percentile Rankings of 99% to 8%. Half of this group of children were of below average ability levels.

Data Collection and Analysis

Initial observation of classroom practices were collected for three months through once a week observational field notes. During the six week unit, participant observation involved daily visits to take field notes, videotape lessons, and conduct six teacher interviews and three student interviews in order to gain an emic perspective. Additionally, we made copies of each students' teacher-designed pre and post unit tests and concept webs.

Analysis consisted of a constant comparative approach (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992) to gain insights into the questions about the teacher that guided the study. First, teacher data in the form of lesson plans, teacher designed pre and post tests, transcripts of field notes, graphic organizers, video tapes, and journal entries were subjected to analysis that resulted in color coded categories of the topics focused upon by the teacher. Further analysis, triangulated with interview transcripts and journal entries revealed underlying categories of the teacher's instructional approach and material resources used for each topic. Mutually exclusive categories resulted from intensive analysis.

Discussion of Findings

How did this whole language teacher make decisions about curriculum and instruction in the interdisciplinary unit on Italy? What was taught? How was it taught? What changes in curriculum and instruction occurred during the unit of study and why?

What was taught? Even though the teacher stated that she wanted to integrate all subject areas, analysis suggests that she focused most often on social studies topics. Social studies was emphasized in lesson plans and reflective journal entries and consisted of a focus on geography 71% of the time (Cultural geography 42%, physical geography 29%) and history 29%. Although the teacher indicated that she wanted to create a balance between history and geography, she thought about and planned for geography most of the time. It is also interesting to note that only twice did the teacher mention social studies processes or connections among concepts she wanted children to learn within the 65 details (e.g. customs, transportation, pots, landmarks, hats, food, maps, cities, Galileo, dates, etc.) she recorded. The first larger concept dealt with the relationship between regional environment and way of life "I want them [the students] to be able to make a connection between the region of Italy and how the environment effects foods and occupations." The second dealt with wanting children to understand change over time, "I need to find out the dates for the eras we'll study so we'll get the big picture - the way it hangs together - the other of time and what was happening in Italy during those times." This statement, clarified in an interview, was referring to ancient Rome, The Renaissance, and modern Italy.

How was it taught? It wasn't until we analyzed the lesson plans, superimposed a layer of practice recorded in 28 transcripts of observational field notes of lessons, then clarified our perceptions through two interviews with the teacher that we discovered three interesting results.

First, categories for instruction consisted of: (1) setting the stage of

learning (e.g., share a trade book, ask children to brainstorm what they know already, etc.), (2) teaching the whole group through question-posing and discussions (e.g., ask children's opinions about topics, ask children to predict what they will see in a video, etc.), (3) inviting students to select small group activities (e.g., doing clay projects, making togas, role playing), (4) offering students the opportunity to work on independent activities (e.g., writing in a learning log, drawing), (5) reflecting on what children found memorable from the daily activities (e.g., recording children's thoughts on a graphic organizer). Many of these lesson elements have been noted by researchers as essential components to effective instruction (Rosenshine, 1986; Gertsen & Keating, 1987). However, it should be noted that not all lesson categories were present for every lesson.

Second, the materials and resources the teacher utilized were varied and included: visual images found in illustrations in children's literature, informational books, videos, slides, written segments from children's literature, visitors who presented information through demonstration and discussion, and artifacts. Activities were often strung together with little thought to unit objectives, sequencing or the impact of one activity upon another. Similar to the preschool teachers studied by Hill, Yinger and Robbins (1981), this teacher first gathered the materials around her and then decided which activities fit the available materials.

A *third* interesting finding was that the teacher consistently expected the students to experience multiple benefits and accomplish varied learning objectives form the use of one resource or one activity. It was not unusual for

her to read a piece of children's literature with the expectation that children would acquire information about a region, customs, and historical event. For example, in planning for the reading of *Five Secrets in a Box* (Brighton, 1987) a story about Galileo's daughter discovering the tools of her father's astronomer's trade, the teacher generated a list of lesson objectives in her journal:

> What a great book! I just love it!!! I'll be able to introduce the Renaissance - Galileo/science connection hmmmm - and the Leaning Tower of Pisa/ they can draw it - how people dressed - food - the idea of mischief (because the daughter gets into mischief)/ they can write and get writing process/stories done. How rich and full this [lesson] can be! And all from just reading one good picture book. Can I get math out of it for the day? Not sure about that - Oh Well!

Many advocates of thematic teaching (Chaplin, 1994; Martinello & Cook, 1994) posit that literature may be the glue that holds interdisciplinary units together. "Not only do most stories we read to children contain events, themes, or characters that suggest activities and concepts from content areas, but they provide for skill and concept learning that are part of the suggested curriculum." (Chaplin, 1994, 157). Martinello & Cook (1994) emphasize that the purpose of interdisciplinary inquiry is not simply to make connections across the curriculum, but to foster children's ability to learn independently. Thus, thematic activities should result in children's in-depth content area knowledge as well as their strategic knowledge. Many educators and

researchers (Alleman & Brophy, 1994; Labbo & Field, In Press) are concerned that whole language, thematic teaching may focus primarily on literacy and therefore overlook or slight other content areas.

What changes in curriculum and instruction occurred during the unit of study and why? Reflective journal entries and interviews suggest that this teacher was primarily interested in two issues she felt related to classroom environment and instruction: (1.) student motivation, (2.) lesson effectiveness and her feelings or emotional state. Comments reflecting teacher's concern about student motivation included, "This turned them off... not motivated at all! Boo!" and "spring fever hit today! The natives were restless and uninterested." or "I want to make sure that everybody is going to get out of it what they want to see." These comments seemed to occur in her journal directly before a second reflection related to instruction and lesson effectiveness. These comments are exemplified by statements such as "I'm having problems grounding the learning ... I think we need to add some dates or something." And, "I'm dissatisfied with the lessons, I think they're not entertaining enough - how to spoof things up because they're not meeting my or students' expectations?" And finally, "I think we need to refocus and review. They're not getting it." These reflections resulted in the teacher making a change in instruction. For example, after pondering students' inattention due to spring fever hitting, she felt they needed refocus and review. The result was the introduction of a time line as an organizer to help students review what they'd learned and relate facts they were learning in an ordered and meaningful way. Like the teachers that Brophy (1986) studied, this teacher's concern with

student motivation was often reflected in the tasks she chose to assign.

Conclusions and Implications

Three general conclusions can be deduced about how a whole language teacher made decisions about curriculum and instruction in an interdisciplinary unit of study on Italy. First, in considering what she taught, we found that her focus was on social studies content the majority of the time. Little time was allocated for language arts, math, or science instruction. Second, in considering how she taught, we found that she (a) utilized teaching activities that ranged from question-posing to recording what children found memorable; (b) sequenced activities arbitrarily; (c) expected one resource or activity to meet multiple content area objectives. Third, changes in curriculum and instruction occurred because of the teacher's concern with student motivation, her perception of lesson effectiveness and her emotional state.

We are concerned by two issues: the decisions made by this highly respected teacher focused on one content area to the neglect of many others and she consistently assumed that one instructional resource or activity would meet several content area goals. Is this happening in other "whole language" classrooms? If so, what is the impact on children's learning.

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